



In February and March 2017, Local Environmental Agriculture Project (LEAP) hosted a series of three Farmer Listening Sessions around the Blue Ridge region of Virginia, with Cooperative Extension Agriculture and Natural Resources agents serving as facilitators. At each session, attendees shared which issues most affect their farm viability; each person then voted to determine the group's top three issues, and each of those three issues were discussed at length. The takeaways from the Listening Sessions were summarized in a Findings Report, which was presented to the Roanoke local food stakeholders group in April 2017, who then prioritized the three most pressing issues that they would work to address. The three issues identified were:

**Consumer Education:** Farmers at all sessions repeatedly discussed how many consumers don't know what the true costs are to produce food. Most consumers want low prices and convenience above all else, but a more educated populace may be willing to pay more for the benefits of locally-produced food. Many farmers stated that they don't have enough time or technological savvy to conduct effective consumer education efforts. Popular ideas for addressing this need/issue/challenge included reaching students in their classroom, farm tours, and marketing campaigns.

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"We need to educate people locally of the true cost of producing the products, because what they're buying at Walmart is not equivalent to what I'm raising, and they don't understand. They see the price difference; they don't understand the costs that go into that."

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"If folks are working together, like a cooperative model or any kind of group marketing structure, it can be a lot cheaper and easier for individual farmers than if they're each trying individually."

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**Cooperative Structure:** Farmers discussed the idea of a cooperative in many contexts. Many farmers talked extensively about the need to cooperate instead of compete in order to earn higher prices in the marketplace. Cooperative purchasing was a popular idea to mitigate the high costs of farm inputs, and tool-sharing could decrease the need for some costly equipment purchases. Lots of farmers wanted to access institutional and large-scale buyers, but couldn't afford the requisite liability coverage and food safety certifications; a co-op is one avenue for a group to potentially leverage their collective strength to overcome

these barriers. This structure could also serve as the backbone for a collective marketing or branding effort, or even for an infrastructure project like a food hub.

**Food Hub:** Farmers identified accessibility to markets as a primary barrier to viability, and an aggregation facility was one suggestion to address this challenge. A food hub could ensure that farmers are able to satisfy the certifications, consistency, and scale required by institutional buyers and large grocery chains. Some stressed that a food hub should be farmer-owned and -operated, thus tying in with the cooperative structure proposed above. The food hub could also be the foundation for marketing efforts. Farmers referenced successful projects in Charlottesville and Abingdon, and the benefit those aggregation facilities provide to area farmers.

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"We need to look at regional aggregation points, where there's slaughterhouses and canning kitchens and produce storage that are regionally spaced out... Roanoke is ripe for a nice food hub."

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